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Instructional practices of elementary social studies teachers in North and South Carolina



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ABSTRACT

Using data from the *Survey of the Status of Social Studies (S4)*, this article describes the instructional decisions and practices of elementary teachers in two neighboring states, one where social studies is tested and another where it is not. We define students' opportunity to learn within these states as a composite of three variables: *time* allocations for social studies (teacher reported instructional time), *methods* for teaching social studies (teacher reported instructional strategies), and *content focus* (teacher reported content emphases and state-mandated curriculum standards). Our guiding research question for this study was: To what extent do teachers' perceptions of elementary school social studies instructional practices and content vary between two states with different testing policies for social studies? Initial findings revealed notable differences that could not be explained by testing policies alone. Therefore, we conducted an exploratory content analysis of the elementary social studies curricula in these neighboring states. We uncovered curricular differences that suggest that state standards influence teachers' decisions in both what and how they choose to teach social studies. However, there were curriculum differences that did not align with *S4* instructional methods and content focus output. Thus, we concluded that other factors apart from the curriculum guide teachers' decision-making. Results provided evidence that students have different opportunities to learn based on (1) state testing policies in social studies, (2) curriculum content, (3) how social studies is delivered (e.g., stand-alone versus integration), and (4) time allocated to social studies. We concluded that these variables constrict or expand students' opportunity to learn social studies and may influence teachers' pedagogical and content choices in elementary social studies.

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"Tests should follow the curriculum. They should be based on the curriculum. They should not replace it or precede it." Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*.

Introduction

In 2006, researchers (Heafner, Lipscomb, & Rock) examined the impact of testing policies on elementary social studies within two bordering southern states. Results suggested that social studies testing mandates resulted in learning environments in which teachers allocated twice as much instructional time than teachers in the non-tested state. Teachers'

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decisions to devote time to social studies in the tested state, South Carolina (SC), aligned primarily with testing mandates; whereas, the teachers in the non-tested state, North Carolina (NC), articulated testing pressures in English Language Arts (ELA) and math as a justification for not teaching social studies. Teachers in both states reported required curriculum as an incentive to teach social studies; however, teachers in the tested state (SC) reported fewer occurrences of curriculum as a rationale for why they taught social studies. Moreover, teachers in the state that did not test social studies (NC) indicated a greater frequency of professional recognition of social studies as valuable as a motive for finding time for social studies.

The focus of the [Heafner, Lipscomb and Rock \(2006\)](#) study was to determine if testing policies predicted time allocations and teachers' motivations to teach social studies. This study did not consider whether or not state testing policies could be associated with *how* social studies is taught or *what* content foci teachers emphasized. To address these unexplored areas, we developed a two-state comparative study between NC and SC to evaluate differences in teacher-reported perceptions of social studies instructional practices and content focus in states that have different testing practices. We define students' opportunity to learn within these states as a composite of three variables: *time* allocations for social studies (teacher reported instructional time), *methods* for teaching social studies (teacher reported instructional strategies), and *content focus* (teacher reported content emphases and state mandated curriculum standards). Our guiding research question for this study was: To what extent do teachers' perceptions of elementary school social studies instructional practices and content vary between two states with different testing policies for social studies? Using results from the *Survey of the Status of Social Studies (S4)* ([Fitchett & VanFossen, 2010](#)), we evaluated the variables of *time*, *instructional methods*, and *content focus*. Initial findings demonstrated notable differences that could not be explained by testing policies alone. Thus, we conducted an exploratory content analysis of the elementary social studies curricula in these neighboring states. We uncovered state-level curricular differences that provided a deeper understanding of factors that influence teacher decisions in both *what* and *how* they choose to teach social studies.

Landscape of the opportunity to learn social studies in elementary schools

There are documented dismal learning outcomes on national assessments (c.f. [National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c](#)) which affirm concerns about the state of social studies in American schools that is consistently articulated in the literature. Social studies educators suggest that negligence of social studies, especially in elementary schools, is evident in the form of minimal time allocations ([Fitchett & Heafner, 2010](#); [Heafner & Fitchett, 2012a, 2012b](#); [Lintner & Schweder, 2008](#); [VanFossen, 2005](#)). Researchers attribute this limited time to increased standardization ([Fitchett & Heafner, 2010](#)), high-stakes accountability ([Heafner & Fitchett, 2012a](#)), and emphasis on state-tested curriculum—which often ignores or at best marginalizes social studies ([Brophy, Alleman, & Knighton, 2009](#); [Heafner & Fitchett, 2012b](#); [VanFossen, 2005](#)). Cross-curricular integration surfaces as a resolution for social studies inclusion ([Bolick, Adams, and Willox, 2010](#); [Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Sierrere, & Steward, 2008](#); [Fitchett & Heafner, 2010](#); [Heafner & Fitchett, 2012b](#); [Hinde, 2009](#); [Holloway & Chiodo, 2009](#); [Leming, Ellington, & Schug, 2006](#); [McGuire, 2007](#); [Rock et al., 2006](#)), but even among proponents of this approach, there is concern that social studies goals and objectives will be sacrificed due to the increased emphasis on literacy skills.

Variance in time for social studies across states implicates other indicators impacting social studies, such as testing, curriculum, and teacher decision-making ([Au, 2007](#); [Fitchett, Heafner & Lambert, 2012](#); [Wills, 2007](#)). The power of teachers to influence the time devoted to social studies within their individual classrooms is touted as evidence of teachers' push against constrictive policies of high-stakes testing ([Gerwin, 2004](#); [Grant, 2007](#); [Pace, 2011](#); [Wills, 2007](#); [Wills & Sandholtz, 2009](#)). Furthermore, teachers exhibit control over *what* and *how* students learn ([Thornton, 2005](#)), even within test-oriented stratifications ([Grant, 2003](#); [Wills & Sandholtz, 2009](#)). This gatekeeping authority ([Thornton, 2005](#)), along with the autonomous and flexible nature of elementary classroom structures and curriculum, enables maverick teachers ([Brophy, 1993](#)) to embrace innovative, constructivist, and research-advocated practices ([Gradwell, 2006](#); [van Hover, 2006](#); [van Hover & Yeager, 2006](#)). However, [Au \(2007\)](#) points out in his meta-analyses of social studies instruction and high-stakes testing that teachers' perceptions of control over content and instructional time is consistently linked to testing pressures. Consequently, time, testing, and teaching methods become nuanced and complex factors that interact to form the landscape of social studies learning opportunities in elementary schools ([Heafner & Fitchett, in review](#)).

Time as an opportunity to learn

[Stallings \(1980\)](#) argues that time provides a measureable variable of learning opportunities. As such, time can be seen as an essential aspect of instruction, necessary for promoting student performance and desired achievement outcomes ([Berry, Smylie, & Fuller, 2008](#); [Hirsch, 2005, 2010](#); [Hirsch & Church, 2009](#); [Hirsch, Emerick, Church, & Fuller, 2007](#); [Ladd, 2009](#); [Reeves, Emerick, & Hirsch, 2006](#)). How time is managed in elementary schools is a determinate of teacher curricular decision-making ([Heafner & Fitchett, 2012b](#); [Wills & Sandholtz, 2009](#)). Therefore, decisions teachers make concerning time allocations reflect the prioritization of social studies content selection and instructional decision-making ([Levstik, 2008](#)). As a result, time becomes an indicator of students' opportunities to learn and a determinant of how that learning will be shaped.

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